

Newspaper: East Greenwich Pendulum

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*Funding formula
changes considered
by Gen. Assembly*

By HANNAH CLARKIN

It's been a long and difficult first year for the newly-made-over East Greenwich School Committee. Their main order of business – the development of plans for a new middle school – was thrown into a state of confusion by the state when the General Assembly cut funding for new school projects.

Compounding this problem, the school district was also threatened with loss of accreditation for the science department at East Greenwich High School.

And so for the four new members of the school committee and the three hold-overs, who have all been working under the pressure of district-wide expectations that at least a referendum vote to get ground broken for a new school be accomplished by the end of the school year, the trial by fire was a difficult one.

With the adjournment of the Rhode Island General Assembly last week, the timing of building a new middle school was left up in the air. Yet, says East Greenwich School Committee Chair Sue Cienki, the committee enters the summer still ready to move forward with building plans.

The way to keep the momentum going with the

projects, say school officials, is to keep the application process going with the governmental agencies still in session.

With this in mind, the school committee will apply to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) Board of Regents on July 1 when it begins to accept applications for school construction projects. East Greenwich will be among the first schools in the state to submit Phase I of its plans beneath new regulations.

The new standards, approved on May 24 by the Rhode Island General Assembly, require more exact plans and cost projection. Due to their anticipation of these changes, Committee Chair, Sue Cienki, says that East Greenwich is likely to become a statewide model for school building projects.

In order to meet these new, more stringent standards, the school committee has completed a detailed analysis of school facilities needs which involved an analysis of existing building conditions, space utilization, educational program modernization, and demographic impact.

From there, the committee developed planning options, working closely with Strategic Building Solutions, Inc. (SBS), held multiple review meetings with various parties including the Facilities Committee and Town Council, as well as providing open meetings to allow for community input and support.

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School board plows ahead with middle school plans

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Depending on the approval process, committee members Cienki and Jean Ann Guliano project the referendum date to fall sometime in the spring of 2008. "We've been working closely with RIDE," says Cienki. "Our application should not come as a surprise to them."

While the Board of Regents reviews the Phase I submission, the Committee will be preparing for Phase II by further developing the conceptual/schematic design. Moving the referendum from November to the Spring is not expected to significantly impact building costs and should still allow for the projects to be completed by the 2010-2011 School Year. The School Committee hopes to obtain at least a 30 percent reimbursement rate from the State.

House Finance Committee Chairman Steven M. Costantino announced today that the Finance Committee is assembling a work group to study the public funding of education in an effort to develop legislation next year to improve the system.

The group will continue the work that was begun in 2005 by the Joint Committee to Establish a Permanent Education Foundation Aid Formula, which has been working to develop a predictable formula that balances students' needs and individual communities' resources.

The joint committee has been working with an advisory group appointed by the House speaker and Senate president and chaired by Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island Kids Count, to develop a formula that recognizes students' needs through a system of weights and recognizes the important relationship between those needs and community resources. The adoption of a formula would provide predictability to school districts as they plan their budgets.

The joint committee presented a proposed formula as legislation submitted in the General Assembly this session, but hoped to continue to work on the proposal with another advisory group that would concentrate on Rhode Islanders' ability to fund the formula.

Chairman Costantino said, rather than rush that legislation through the Assembly during the hectic last days of the session, he would prefer that the House Finance Committee work on it during the out-of-session months this year and come back to General Assembly next year with a proposal that has been carefully developed and studied.

"Education funding has been one of the most contentious budget issues in Rhode Island every year for decades. If we are going to make major changes to

the way we determine communities' aid to education, we should take the time to make sure we're doing it properly," said Chairman Costantino (D-Dist. 8, Providence).

The work group will consist of members of the House Finance Committee as well as representatives who served on the joint committee, which was co-chaired by Rep. Edith H. Ajello (D-Dist. 3) of

Providence and Sen. Hanna M. Gallo (D-Dist. 27) of

Cranston. Other members included Representative Crowley, Sen. June N. Gibbs (R-Dist. 12,

Middletown, Little Compton, Newport, Tiverton), Sen. Daniel J. Issa (D-Dist. 16, Central Falls, Cumberland, Pawtucket), Rep. Helio Melo (D-Dist. 64, East Providence), Sen. Rhoda E. Perry (D-Dist. 3, Providence), Rep. John A. Savage (R-Dist. 65, East Providence), Rep. John Patrick Shanley Jr. (D-Dist. 35, South Kingstown), Sen. V. Susan Sosnowski (D-Dist. 37, South Kingstown, New Shoreham).

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